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By August Cole

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The perceived new military threat from China is a growing factor in a Pentagon debate over weapons spending.

In recent weeks, the Department of Defense has been roiled by an unusually fierce fight over the future of the F-22 Raptor, a $143 million jet produced by Lockheed Martin Corp. and Boeing Co. that the Air Force and others hope will uphold the nation's pre-eminence in the skies.

With the U.S. focused on fighting insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, such weaponry for battling superpowers has been seen by some U.S. officials as less important to the wars of the future.

With that in mind, the Pentagon has been content to make do with fewer F-22s -- which became battle-ready at the end of last year -- and instead get ready for a cheaper workhorse jet, the Lockheed F-35 Lightning II, that costs less than half as much and is due to be ready in 2013. The F-22 production line was supposed to start the shutdown process in fiscal 2009.

But in recent weeks, the Air Force, backed by a brigade of supporters from the defense industry and Congress, has been waging a campaign to buy 198 more F-22s, for a total of 381. In a rare twist, the Air Force has pursued the purchases over the objections of Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England, the Pentagon officials charged with tough budget calls.

A major justification for such purchases is China, where the roaring economy and accompanying growth of the country's military have resurrected the notion that big weapons are critical to the U.S.'s strategic future.

"America had to look at the threat" when China successfully tested an antisatellite missile last year, said Air Force Lt. Gen. Raymond Johns, deputy chief of staff for strategic plans and programs, at a defense conference last week.

The China card is being played not just on behalf of the F-22, but also in debates over spending on a range of things including new Navy ships and a Marine Corps amphibious fighting vehicle. It doesn't hurt that Russia has been reborn as a possible military threat, flush with oil money and warning of the consequences if the U.S. installs a planned radar system in Europe.

"I'm trying to look beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. I'm trying to look at what is the threat down the road," Pennsylvania Rep. John Murtha, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee's Defense Subcommittee, told an audience at an industry conference last week.

Mr. Murtha said that he recently spoke with Mr. Gates about the F-22 program and that his committee is negotiating with the Air Force about adding more of the jets in the supplemental budget.

As a minor concession, Mr. England agreed to buy four F-22s with supplemental funds, but that is insufficient to keep production alive. In its 2009 budget request, the Pentagon provided no money for additional planes, nor did it provide funding to shut down the line, effectively putting the decision into the hands of the next administration.

Some see the increasing references to Chinese military might as a transparent device the defense industry can use to buoy weapons spending, which has been at historic highs in the post-9/11 years. "The reality is we are fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the F-22 has not performed a single mission in either theater," Mr. Gates said at a Feb. 6 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the 2009 defense budget. "So it is principally for use against a near peer in a conflict, and I think we all know who that is."

People familiar with the tenor of the dialogue between Mr. England and Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne describe the relationship as tense and strained. Mr. Wynne said last week that "Secretary England is a good friend of mine and a great patriot...I still think he's a great guy." Mr. England declined to comment.

The Air Force must walk a fine line between strong advocacy and not publicly challenging the authority of top Pentagon civilian leaders. In a sign of the high stakes, the Air Force issued a statement Friday evening from Mr. Wynne and Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley that the service "wholeheartedly supports the President's budget request for the F-22 program," rebuking comments made by an Air Force general earlier in the week that appeared to challenge Secretary Gates's plans for the F-22.

The F-22 was developed in an era when the U.S. was focused on rival superpowers. It is capable of cruising faster than the speed of sound while remaining nearly invisible to radar. The Air Force believes the plane could shine in battles that might lie years down the road against countries such as China, or against smaller nations buying advanced weapons systems on the open market.

But under current plans, Lockheed will produce about 60 more F-22s. The assembly line was scheduled to go dark after that, but the Air Force has strong support outside the Pentagon working to keep the F-22 line alive.

Lockheed stands to reap tens of billions of dollars if the efforts succeed. Lawmakers and top industry executives have made their appeals in letters to Mr. Gates. The chief executives of the biggest companies involved with the F-22 -- Lockheed, Boeing, Northrop Grumman Corp., Raytheon Co., United Technologies Corp. and BAE Systems Inc. -- made their case in a Dec. 11 letter to Mr. Gates seeking funding for 20 more jets in the fiscal-year 2009 budget.

Their appeal mentioned the 25,000 jobs in 44 states associated with the F-22 but also said the jet "should ensure air dominance over current and emerging potential adversaries for the next 30 years."

In a similar letter to Mr. Gates, members of Congress wrote that "terminating the Raptor program at such a crucial and uncertain time only further encourages our potential adversaries" to develop a comparable jet.

However, the appeals have run into a vocal and powerful foe in Mr. England. As the former president of General Dynamics' Fort Worth aircraft unit that built the F-16, he is no stranger to fighters. Mr. England is adamant that the Air Force can't afford almost 200 more F-22s, and instead should be focused on F-35s. The F-35 will be used by the Air Force as well as the Navy, Marine Corps and U.S. allies such as Britain who are sharing its development costs.